

DAILY NEWS EDITORIAL

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Sharing powerlessness

Powerless though they are, neighborhood councils, Mayor James Hahn boasts, are the "revolution" that "will show that Los Angeles will become the model city of the future."

Somebody tell that to the affluent and well-organized Westsiders in the Pacific Palisades, who have refused to join Hahn's "revolution," or in Brentwood, where they are hesitant to do so.

In these tony areas, independent community groups have existed for a long time and, despite having no formal city recognition or funding, they wield more power at City Hall than any other neighborhood groups in the city. The Los Angeles City Council takes their concerns seriously; they file lawsuits to stop city projects they don't like; they have a voice in City Hall.

Neighborhood councils are everything that the Brentwood and Palisades groups are not: impotent, purely symbolic and largely worthless, except perhaps for the long-term impact of more communities getting organized, learning just how badly City Hall is run and getting angry enough to fight back.

Neighborhood councils have no say over city spending or land-use policy, and because they become part of the city's governance structure, they give up the right to sue the city or even appeal land-use and other decisions.

Some neighborhoods, to be sure, have expressed interest. So far, 39 neighborhood councils have been formed, and Hahn expects Los Angeles to have as many as 70 by the end of the year.

But most of these neighborhoods don't have the advantages of a Brentwood or Pacific Palisades. They lack the private funding to maintain a powerful organization. They don't have residents who are already well-connected in the downtown power structure, pouring money into the coffers of city officials. They don't have innumerable lawyers ready to litigate on the community's behalf.

For these neighborhoods, even a morsel of symbolic power is an improvement.

Not so for Brentwood and the Palisades, whose residents know what real power is. In these communities, public services aren't a problem. Crime is under control. Calls to City Hall get answered. Nobody is going to put halfway houses or affordable housing projects in these neighborhoods.

Neighborhood councils could never offer the sort of access to government that Brentwood and Palisades residents already enjoy -- that all city residents should enjoy -- and so they're taking a pass on the plan altogether.

Neighborhood councils, which have neither clout nor adequate funding, are no "revolution." They're a farce.

Within most communities, ordinary citizens trying to make their neighborhoods healthier have no choice but to go along and try to make the best of it. The best they can do is to get together and define a series of demands for more money and more authority. Within City Council districts, they

need to support each other on local issues so that City Council members can't pit one neighborhood council against another or ignore any of them.

Their motto needs to be one for all and all for one. That's the only way advisory neighborhood councils can create any kind of "revolution" under the Hahn administration.